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# Can I really watch what I want when I want it on my TV?

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## Can I really watch what I want when I want it on my TV?



By Lynda Irons

My cassette player died yesterday. I shook it and banged it gently—to no avail. I have not looked for a new one yet, but I suspect that in these days of iPods, iPhones, and other iThis and iThat, it may be challenging to find a quality player. I belong to the old school where I listen to a tape of an artist from beginning to end, although MP3 players and iPods have revolutionized the way one listens to music. Consumers now can pick and choose songs they want to listen to rather than listening to ones someone else told them to listen to. This self-selection and customization is the underlying mantra of today's technology-savvy consumer. Witness the explosion of Web 2.0 tools, including MySpace, Facebook, and Flickr, just to name a few. YouTube, now owned by Google, allows individuals to post self-created videos for mass consumption.

This opportunity to tailor and create content has yet to be applied to cable television programming. There had been some discussion in the industry to allow consumers choices of selecting programming suitable to their interests and desires. In fact, in a 2005 statement, FCC Chairman Kevin Martin felt an "alternative is for cable and DBS operators to offer programming in a more a la carte manner, giving consumers more choice over which programs they want to purchase." [1] As a subscriber to digital cable, I heartily applaud this sentiment as I am paying for content that I do not watch. However, these conversations have been short and abbreviated.

While a la carte programming is not yet available, there are two separate events that will have huge impacts on consumers and their television habits: digital television and IPTV.

Congress has mandated that beginning in February 2009, conversion to all-digital television broadcasting, also known as the digital television (DTV) transition whereas digital is a more efficient transmission technology that allows broadcast stations to offer *improved picture and sound quality* as well as offer more *programming options for consumers* through multiple broadcast streams (multicasting). [2]

And while not new (in fact, companies have been "trying to bring the Internet to your home since 1996" [3]), it becoming clear that IPTV is moving to the forefront of providing consumers with choices of how, what, when, and where they watch TV content.

According to a recent MSN.com headline, "Is the Internet Finally Killing TV?", NBC is "streaming 2,200 hours of live competition in 25 sports on the NBCOlympics.com website." [4] Even the major networks recognize the need and value for presenting content in non-traditional formats. With streaming, for example, watchers are watching the Olympics on their computer screens. With IPTV, viewers can watch Internet content on their TVs.

So what Is IPTV? Internet Protocol television is "becoming a common denominator for systems where television and/or video signals are distributed to residential subscribers via a broadband connection" [5] Or, in other words, "the delivery of television content over IP technologies by Internet service providers to their subscribers." [6] IPTV is also a "digital platform that allows consumers to *customize and create their own content*." [7] Consumers will now have the opportunity to view Internet programming on their high-quality digital television sets.

Just because consumers can watch programming on their high-quality TVs does not necessarily mean that quality content will naturally follow. While YouTube enthusiasts love watching the snippets on their personal computers, Albert Cheng, executive vice president of digital media at Disney/ABC argues that "viewers will expect high-quality, professionally produced shows." [8]

The bottom line, IPTV service will "bring fully personalized, on-demand experience to the TV environment." [9] According to Michael Lantz, guest columnist for TVB Europe, IPTV (InternetTV) is reaching a tipping point and that content producers and service providers not only need to keep abreast of these developments but be at the forefront of change. [10]

The entire Internet Web 2.0 revolution no longer has passive participants who merely absorb content from a myriad of content providers. Rather Internet users are fully participating in their own experience, even creating it. Lantz argues that IPTV brings value-added content in two ways: truly non-linear experiences and interactive services. [11] While providing consumers with choices, Peter Weitzel, principal technology manager for Siemens IT Solutions & Systems, notes "there remain considerable limitations on what can actually be delivered." [12] He feels that "IPTV services complement television, but they can only flourish when they offer more than just broadcast content." [13] Director Paul Kafno observed that "consumers are increasingly looking to specialist channels that can easily be assembled by hobby enthusiasts and other special interest groups." He continues "users are empowered to make their own choices rather than be dictated to by schedulers. They are also compelled to make their own programming and share it with others." [14]

And the delivery of content is not without confusion. According to Colin Dixon, a broadband media analyst for The Diffusion Group, "people are going to get television from the Web through a real hodgepodge of technologies, including game console with movie download services, hybrid set-top boxes that let you download shows and watch satellite or cable, and Internet-ready TVs." [15] According to a 2004 Harris Poll, 66 percent of all U.S. adults are now online. [16] Another study shows that "almost half (48 percent) of all families with children between the ages of 2 and 17 have all four of the media staples: a television, a VCR, video game equipment, and a computer." [17] Accordingly, there will be a convergence of technologies and content to afford the consumer with an

enriched and rewarding experience that is tailored to meet his/her own needs.

However, IPTV has its cheerleaders and distracters. Members attending the 2007 Royal Television Society Thames Valley Centre Technical Colloquium spoke that the money invested in IPTV "represents a huge gamble." [18] Alex Gibbons, director, Digital Media Sales, Europe, Akamai, argues that the "industry should concentrate on delivering programming to the television via the Internet for real business opportunities." [19] It appears that billions are being invested in a not-yet-proven commodity, and yet businesses must capitalize on these emerging technologies in order to stay competitive. Iain Morris notes that the United States is "one of the most closely monitored IPTV markets in the world." [20] The two major competitors, AT&T and Verizon, are slowly encroaching into territory previously dominated by major cable providers and may package their IPTV services differently (Verizon calls it FIOS-branded service as IPTV while AT&T is truly IPTV), but their customers are slowly being offered more choices in how content is delivered, accessed, and customized. [21]

While AT&T and Verizon are slowly negotiating the IPTV horizon, Telekom Austria's Helmut Leopold is chairman of the Broadband Services Forum, a body of "representatives from IPTV operators, content providers, and equipment manufacturers that is committed to exploring new IPTV opportunities." [22] Not only programming is called into question, but companies are forced to investigate how to contain costs while building infrastructures to ensure "high-quality delivery of content over the Internet." [23] Erik Keith, senior analyst for broadband infrastructure for Current Analysis, notes that "all operators are going to have to implement IP video of some sort to compete effectively in the long term" [24] And consumers want "good, clear video signs, and they want it at a good price, and they want to be able to pay one bill." [25]

What does the future hold for IPTV? James Health, Dittberner Associates, puts it very succinctly

You have to build this IPTV network to keep your broadband Internet customers from leaving, and there are going to be some new applications you can put on it and make some money. In the interim, you might as well as offer IPTV because it helps defer some of the costs of building the network in the first place. [26]

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